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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RPO DUBAI 000044

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SUBJECT: USG-FUNDED DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL BRINGS IRANIANS AND AMERICANS TOGETHER

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CLASSIFIED BY: Amy Madsen, Acting Director, Iran Regional Presence Office, Department of State.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The UAE's first documentary film initiative, "Documentary Voices: Pulling Focus" was "a success" film festival primary coordinator Mashid Zamani told IRPOffs July 22. Zamani said that while she faced many challenges during the planning stages typical to any new project, the festival met two important objectives: it connected Iranian and American filmmakers and it offered to the Dubai public a much-needed documentary film platform. Emmy Award winning documentary filmmaker Anisa Mehdi acted as Artistic Director for the film festival. The Iran Regional Presence Office (IRPO) and the International Information Programs (IIP) bureau provided the initial project grants needed for the project, which helped to foster public outreach to Iranians. Local institutions like the Dubai Cultural Authority and private sources augmented this seed funding, helping to increase the awareness of this art form in Dubai and drawing in Arab filmmakers. Future festivals can include even stronger content and there is potential to hold such programs both in Dubai and Iran, Zamani said. End Summary.

Film Program Planning Challenging but Worthwhile

¶2. (U) IRPOffs met with Mashid Zamani, the Dubai-based Managing Director of the partially USG-funded "Documentary Voices" documentary film initiative on July 22. IRPOffs were looking to gain insight on the challenges and successes of the program, in hopes of applying lessons learned to potential future projects. Varying degrees of support from partners; constraints on Zamani's time from fundraising efforts; and inconsistent oversight over programming made the planning and implementation of the program complex said Zamani, but she added that the festival did succeed in bringing together Iranian and American filmmakers and in educating the Dubai public about the process of creating documentary films. Given these two successes, she sees the potential to have more film programs in the future in both Dubai and in Iran.

¶3. (C) Partners: Based upon discussions with IRPO which began in 2007, IRPO and Zamani envisioned the project incorporating not only film showings typical to a cross-cultural film festival, but an educational component that would encourage Dubai-based filmmakers to learn about the full documentary film process from conception to filming since the field is in its nascent stage in UAE. Given that the program was in Dubai, IRPO emphasized that UAE sensitivities needed to be addressed,

meaning the festival would have to include Arab, and at least a few Emirati filmmakers. To plan such a program, Zamani initially accepted help from the "grandfather" of Iranian documentary film and founder of the Kish International Documentary Film Festival, Kamran Shirdel. According to Zamani, Shirdel was forced to resign from the Kish Festival, but he left with the support and movies of several renowned international documentarists, offering to Zamani a festival ready to be implemented. Further, he lent to the film initiative expertise in management and coordination.

14. (C) Zamani said she cordially annulled her collaboration with Shirdel after several discussions because Shirdel sought an "unrealistic" amount of resources and creative control of the event. IRPO then introduced Zamani to US-based filmmaker Anisa Mehdi (Note: Mehdi had been one of IRPO's first Official Speakers in early 2007. Endnote) who was able to leverage her network to bring American filmmakers to the program. Zamani said her collaboration with Mehdi was successful and she would work with her again. Shirdel maintained a positive relationship, however, with the program's organizers - his film "Pearl of the Gulf" was shown on opening night. Shirdel's Film documented the leadership and culture of mid-1970s Dubai and was a big hit with Emirati patrons. Looking towards the future, Zamani noted that Shirdel would be a strong partner for a potential American-Iranian film festival in Iran.

15. (C) Funding: Initially, Zamani spent her efforts actively seeking Dubai-based public and corporate sponsors, including Dubai's Knowledge Village, the Millennium Hotel, and in-kind advertising contributions from the Arab Media Group. IRPO gave a grant of \$41,000 to Zamani that was amended to a total value of \$53,000, and State's Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP) contributed \$60,000 to the program. USG-support was not publicized because of the potential sensitivity of Iranian participants towards a program with US government

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involvement. Also, the film initiative included films from the broader Middle East region, in addition to Iranian films, in order to make the US-Iran focus less prominent.

16. (C) Internal Support: As the first of its kind documentary festival in UAE, Zamani found support for it amongst Dubai authorities and veterans of the festival scene in Dubai. Early on, she consulted the Artistic Director of the Gulf Film Festival (GFF), which is organized by the Dubai Arts and Culture Authority. The director was generous in his advice to her about effective ways to plan and market the festival. She faced a minor setback, though, when the organizers of the GFF "purposely" set their festival dates for the same week as the initial "Documentary Voices" date in April, forcing her to reschedule the program to July, a time when many people try to escape Dubai's heat. Despite its less than ideal timing, the success of the Documentary Voices festival has already prompted the Dubai Culture and Arts Authority, which donated \$40,000 to this year's festival, to reach out to Zamani to support next year's program more actively by folding it under their purview.

17. (C) Programming: Zamani claimed that her preoccupation with soliciting financial support meant she could not maintain full oversight over the content and schedule of the festival, which was under the direction of the Programming Director. As a result, she thought - and received feedback - that there was inconsistency in the quality of submitted films such that some films from the United States were "too basic and boring" compared to their Middle Eastern counterparts. She heard from Emirati and Arab nationals that Arab filmmakers were not well represented. From the outset, organizers planned for an equal proportion of American, Iranian, and Arab films and filmmakers but this plan was altered in the week preceding the festival when two of the Arab filmmakers (one a Palestinian who was unable to get a visa to the UAE) were unable to attend. For the next festival, Zamani underlined the importance of allowing significantly more networking time for the participants, which this year's packed schedule did not allow. From informal

discussions with participants, Zamani found that the most popular films were non-political, such as Satellite Queens, a film about female hosts of a primetime Arab talk show, and Aref Squared, an Iranian film about a poor cab driver in Tehran longing to meet a popular pop singer.

Connecting People and Future Prospects

18. (C) Iranians and Americans Interaction: Zamani noted that the program brought together Iranians and Americans through a common interest and both groups were keen to view the others' films. Iranians and Americans did not always socialize in mixed groups, but Zamani alluded that this separation can be partially attributed to the lack of formal networking opportunities in the full schedule. Most of the participants were unaware of the USG funding in the festival and Zamani kept this fact under the radar as most of the audience was Iranian.

19. (C) Press: There was extensive media coverage of "Documentary Voices." Zamani advertised the film festival in several Dubai newspapers and did twice daily spots on Dubai Eye radio station. She partly credited the continuous media attention to the presence of Maestro Nader Mashayekhi, a world-renowned composer who is the conductor of Tehran's Symphony Orchestra. Iranian press covered the festival significantly, and Zamani did interviews with Agha's digital, Persian Media Company, and the Iran Student News Agency (ISNA). The media interest helped participant filmmakers gain exposure to the public.

10. (C) Future Programs: The festival could be continued on a yearly basis and there are compelling reasons to host it both in Dubai and in Iran, Zamani said. For artistic and "practical" reasons, Dubai should host this film program because it is important to promote documentary film in a region that has only produced three such films. This festival directly responds to needs to bring documentary film to the public and to nurture budding filmmakers. Also, Iranian, Americans, and Arabs can more easily gather together in Dubai. A joint American-Iranian film program in Iran, which has a sophisticated film industry, would meet "political" objectives of connecting American and Iranians. Zamani has already heard from documentary film centers in Iran who have expressed interest in a joint project, including one headed by director Masoud Bakshi. An Iranian-hosted festival would be more sophisticated in content, opting for higher level master classes and joint panels rather than the basic workshops

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offered at this year's Dubai documentary film festival.

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